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# MRS. ANNIE BESANT:

## HER FIGHT FOR INDIA

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# MRS. ANNIE BESANT:

## HER FIGHT FOR INDIA

Mrs. Annie Besant was a warrior all through her life; and her battles began from her very youth when she rebelled against the rigid orthodoxy of her clergyman-husband. The fight that thus began lasted two full generations and though the immediate objective and the region changed from time to time, the main aim was always the same,—she fought for freedom and justice in the widest sense.

Early in these struggles, she became associated with Charles Bradlaugh, the great friend of all oppressed peoples and that association naturally brought her into contact with India. One of her earliest pamphlets was on this country and it was written before she set foot on our shores.

When she came here in the early nineties, she was immediately impressed by the urgent need to correct the angle of vision of the rising generation. The prevailing feeling among the educated people was one of disgust at anything Indian and very few seemed to recognise that though for the moment the West dazzled humanity by its achievements, there was a time when their own Motherland had occupied an even more glorious position. And Mrs. Besant, for her part, felt assured that the present eclipse was only temporary, bound to vanish very soon; and to speed up that end, she decided to do her best by directing the education of India's youths on right lines.

That led her to the establishment of the Central Hindu College, Benares, which after a glorious career, developed into

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the Hindu University. From its very start, the College formed the centre of a vigorous campaign to hasten Hindu Renaissance. Her text books on Hinduism, so written as not to injure the feelings of any other community, at once became popular throughout India; and institutions modelled on her college were established at several centres.

With many of these she was directly associated; and her zeal to extend and improve the educational facilities available to Indian youths manifested itself in a variety of ways all through her life. Numerous are the schools and colleges that owe their birth and development to her; and even more numerous are the youths who were able to complete their studies because of her generosity. Where education was concerned, she never stinted, not even spared herself; and if one can get at the figures, the amount that she paid of her own earnings or collected for education, will be found to be in lakhs.

## Eventful Days at Adyar

On the death of Col. Olcott, Mrs. Besant was elected President of the Theosophical Society, which naturally led her to spend a part of her time in Adyar; and very soon, Pandit Malavyaji's vigorous campaign for a Hindu University and some unpleasant development at Benares influenced her to hand over the Benares College to him to form the nucleus of his greater edifice; and Dr. Besant put all her energies into Theosophical work.

Those were eventful days at Adyar. It soon became a centre of pilgrimage attracting Theosophists and others from all parts of the world. The culmination was, however, a bit unpleasant. The two boys of one of her Theosophical workers, whom Mrs. Besant expected to develop into world personalities, formed the subject of a court fight for guardianship; and though she won in the end in the Privy Council,

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the controversy considerably weakened the prestige of the Theosophical Society.

Mrs. Besant had, from her earliest days in India, been a vigorous critic of our social evils and had put forward several constructive efforts to overcome them—including schools for Harijan children. At this juncture, 1912-13, she turned more vigorously to those activities and delivered a series of lectures in Madras advocating speedier reform. And to form a convenient centre for such activities, she started the Y. M. I. A. and built its present home, including the Gokhale Hall, which is still the biggest meeting place in Madras.

In furtherance of these activities she also started in 1913 the *Commonweal*, a weekly, perhaps the best political review so far attempted in this country. She was able to enlist the services of some of the best writers, both in India and the West, including Mr. Bernard Shaw and Mr. Brailsford. Its supplements on subjects like co-operation added to its popularity and prestige : and the circulation rose steadily week by week—until *New India* made its appearance, monopolising all attention—Mrs. Besant's as also, of the reading public.

## "New India"

That great daily, which had so stormy and eventful a career, had a strange birth. Early in 1914, Mrs. Besant was away in England when the proprietor of the *Madras Standard* offered to sell it ; and Mr. B. P. Wadia, the manager of the Theosophical Publishing House, and her chief business adviser, decided to buy the daily, subject of course to Mrs. Besant's approval. The arrangement was intended to be kept secret ; but it somehow leaked out and several Theosophists, who did not like her starting the *Commonweal* itself, raised a protest and even sent a person to Bombay to take the earliest opportunity to convey their feelings to

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Mrs. Besant. But Mr. Wadia arranged to have a letter put into her hands on board the steamer itself, requesting her not to commit herself until she discussed the matter with him. That request, however, proved superfluous. Mrs. Besant had made up her mind even before leaving London to take a more active part in Indian public life and this proposal to have a daily therefore very well fitted with her plans.

So, immediately on arrival at Madras, she ratified the sale—and that opened up what proved to be the most thrilling and eventful chapter in her life.

Within a few days of her taking over the paper, she decided that the name *Madras Standard* was a bit provincial and changed it to *New India*. The news service was strengthened and the staff entirely replaced. No newspaper in India had ever so brilliant a set of sub-editors. Almost every one of them was an acquisition by himself ; and as they enjoyed complete freedom of expression, the *New India* immediately made a mark and built up a circulation which no Indian daily had so far enjoyed. Seven thousand was reached in four months and ten thousand in the next two ; and if only adequate printing facilities were available, the circulation could have reached to a far higher figure.

## A Clean Fight

From the outset, the editorial staff ignored the existence of the Press Act, and as one Lucknow paper put it bluntly at the time, "the *New India* kicked the Bureaucrat straight in the face." That was so in freedom of expression ; but there was hardly any malice or misrepresentation. All the same, the official attitude changed ; and when Mrs. Besant openly said that her paper enjoyed that exceptional freedom because of her white skin—she often put it very bluntly—the Government decided to strike ; and the order came one afternoon, asking her to deposit a security.

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The order gave her a shock. She had never expected it. Friends were immediately consulted. The first idea was to continue the fight and take the consequences relying on public support; but the Liberal politicians advised her to be more cautious.

"If you change the tone of your paper, the fight is as good as given up," one of them stressed. "If you don't change the tone, the security that you deposit will at once be confiscated and another one will be asked. That too will soon go, and with it the press. Is it worth incurring the loss?"

The argument seemed to make a deep impression on her and the gentleman left the *New India* office after making sure that the white flag would be immediately hoisted. To those in the office, it seemed for a time, as if that was to be the end; but the staff, led by Mr. Wadia, put up a stiff fight.

"Why not we go down fighting to the last drop? What will be the reaction of a surrender on the Home Rule movement?" they asked.

The night passed without any decision, but the dawn saw her resolute.

"Full steam ahead." Those were her orders at 7-30 A. M. when she entered the office and the messages of support that poured in during the day left no chance for the Liberal advice.

The only instructions given to the editorial staff was: "Let everything be white-hot. Let there be no needless sparks." And those instructions were observed to the last.

## Public Support

The response from the public exceeded her greatest expectations. Bombay sent enough money to pay down twice the security asked for, and the total subscriptions came to Rs. 60,000.

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*New India* had by now become not only her mouthpiece, but the exponent of two great movements, the Home Rule League and the Labour Union ; and the Government seemed to think that the more effective way to tackle her activities was to silence Besant rather than silence her paper. So in 1917 she was interned at Ooty with Mr. Arundale and Mr. Wadia.

The Home Rule movement had, by now, taken an all-India shape. It was the direct outcome of the Great War and the change that came over the British attitude towards India. When in 1914, India gave enthusiastic support to England and her army stemmed the German advance in Flanders, Britain was most lavish in its sentiments ; and India was assured the full fruits of the war, the recognition of the principle of self-determination to all nationalities, large or small. There was however a gradual change in this attitude and assurances of self-determination became less feeble and Indians began to feel that they may not after all find themselves in any better position at the end of the war.

## War Disappointment

The Home Rule movement was the outcome of this feeling of disappointment ; and Mrs. Besant took the lead in harnessing it. Curiously enough, she had very little support at the start. At the Bombay Congress in 1915, all the elder leaders ranged themselves against her move and got her to postpone the organisation of the League—but in return she obtained the promise that the propaganda she intended to start would be taken up by the Congress itself.

Within a few weeks, she realised that they could not redeem that promise and so formally launched the League. And once again, the response proved stupendous. Members joined in thousands, and propaganda through the press as well as the platform was at once begun on a vigorous scale. Every member of the *New India* staff became a propagandist,

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spending the evenings in city meetings and the week-ends at moffussal centres.

The first indication of official hostility was furnished by the ban on students joining the League as associates. With a view not to risk their future career, Mrs. Besant at once gave up the "associate" section; but beyond that she refused to go. But even there it was only a nominal change—for, the enthusiasts amongst the youths were given a fresh field for service through the Boy Scout Movement, which in India had so far been confined to only Anglo-Indians.

## The Labour Front

Beside these, the Government of Madras had another source of embarrassment—the Labour movement of which Mr. B. P. Wadia was the prime mover. When he took up the cause, the position of Labour was most irksome; and the organisation of the very first Trade Union had an excellent effect. One by one, the galling factors disappeared and such was the change wrought in the mentality of the labourers that one of the employees went to the length of summoning a senior official for assault; and his fellow-employees gave evidence so fearlessly that the accused was fined.

The employers, though they yielded on several points and removed several grievances, kept up a vigorous representation to the Government; and they scored when they held out the threat that their war contracts would be interfered if Mr. Wadia did not slow his pace.

In the interests of the bigger fight, the Home Rule movement, Mrs. Besant agreed to that demand; and the Union men readily fell in with the plan; but the respite or the truce thus secured was only momentary. The Government decided that she should effectively be silenced. Lord Pentland, the then Governor, sent for her; and told her quite frankly that unless she mended her ways, she would be interned with her two associates. She had anticipated the blow and so

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was prepared to tell the Governor that she could not, and would not retrace ; and within a few minutes of her leaving the Government House, the order was served on her requiring her to quit Madras and stay at Ooty virtually as a prisoner.

## Surprise to Government

It was a severe blow, but it was parried. The official expectation that *New India* would cease to exist did not fructify. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Besant appeared before the Chief Presidency Magistrate and announced that she had parted with the press to Mr. Pandarinath Telang and asked that he be declared the printer and publisher. The Magistrate was hardly prepared and wanted time ; but Dr. Besant was insistent—and she came out with her object achieved ; and within a few minutes, the city of Madras had the joyful news that *New India*—though for the day in the form of a brief leaflet—as a regular issue would be available the next day.

The reaction of the internment was quite the reverse of what the Government had expected.

In Madras, Dr. S. Subramania Iyer, the G.O.M., took up the leadership. In Bengal, Mr. B. Chakravarti and Desabandu Das ; in U.P., Dr. Sapru and Mr. Chintamani ; in Bombay Mr. Jayakar rushed to the League's support ; and in Maharashtra Lok. Tilak kept the flag flying through his own sister organisation. The membership of the League went up by hundreds ; and equally warm was the support to *New India*.

As days passed by and the internment continued, Gandhiji joined the protest and even suggested a plan of Civil Disobedience, which a special conference endorsed in Madras.

## The Great Honour

Happily, Mr. Lloyd George's Cabinet recognised the need for pacification and taking advantage of the Mesopotamian controversy, appointed Mr. Montagu as the Secretary

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of State. The great announcement of August 1917, laying down Responsible Government as the goal of British policy in India opened a new chapter in Indo-British relations. Thereafter, Mrs. Besant's release was only a question of days; though it was delayed rather long by red tape formalities. And the Nation recognised her great services by bestowing on her the greatest honour at its disposal, the presidentship of the Congress, at its next session at Calcutta.

The freedom of criticism claimed by *New India* could not but annoy the Government; for, not a single official mistake failed to receive its notice, nor did it hesitate to give publicity to most inconvenient documents. The representation of the I. C. S. on the reforms issue constituted a typical instance. To this day, it is not known to whom *New India* owed that copy. It came by post; but it bore evidence adequate to convince Mrs. Besant that it was genuine; and it was at once published.

Though the Government took primitive action wherever its criticisms exceeded the bounds set by the Press Act, it must be recognised that its writings received prompt attention. Mr. Armitage, the then Commissioner of Police always welcomed complaints of any mistake or misdeed by his subordinates and it was a most pleasant aspect of this fight that neither side hit below the belt. Not once did Mrs. Besant feel that the C. I. D. had misrepresented her; they on their part were dealt with quite fairly. Full facilities were given for their reporting or other duties; and Mrs. Besant went to the length of giving them full information if any one tried to mislead the youths to subversive ideas.

## Powerful Advocacy

Thanks to this co-operation, *New India* found its position considerably strengthened in redressing several just complaints. Two instances are noteworthy. Soon after the war

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broke out, a few mofussil merchants came to the *New India* office and reported that at the sale of the dyes seized from the Germans, which was to take place the next day, the expert in charge had decided to sell it in big lots, which would mean their acquisition by a few rich firms enjoying the support of the big banks.

The day's issue of *New India* was already out. So, a new leading article was written, put in type, and a proof copy sent to the expert with a covering letter that it would appear the next day—requesting him for any remarks if he desired to make. The expert at once sent an assurance that the sale would be put off and that on the postponed date, the dyes would be sold in conveniently small lots. This triumph meant a saving of several lakhs of rupees to Indian merchants.

An even more decisive reversal of official policy concerned the war-time ban on skins. Non-Indian merchants had got scent of it and had managed to get rid of their stocks and if the ban were to continue, Indian merchants stood to a loss of over a crore of rupees. This hardship was taken to the knowledge of the Government; but no relief was got. Even a deputation failed to produce any result.

As a last resort, the merchants brought all the papers to the *New India* office, and it took up the fight. A series of articles began, daily discussing one aspect of the ban and on the thirteenth day came an urgent telegram from Simla that the ban had been cancelled!

The Government of India were subscribing to no less than 62 copies of *New India*.

## Quite Disinterested

The most remarkable feature of these fights was the disinterestedness of the service rendered. From none of the beneficiaries did the paper, in spite of its great losses, ask for

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a pie ; nor did it get. Numerous were such tainted offers of help ; they were all turned down. Dr. Besant went to the length of insisting that the Railways should not be written to for the free passes which were then being readily sent for all important public functions. What a contrast it is with the Golden Free Passes which some editors to-day enjoy for their personal use !

To Mrs. Besant, the period of internment was most trying—mainly because of its enforced idleness. And that is easily understood if one recalled her daily routine during these eventful days. Her routine of daily work will stagger most people.

She would get up before dawn and leave Adyar by seven. The car would go straight to Sir C. P.'s house ; there would be a chat for five to ten minutes ; by 7-30 work will begin at the *New India* office. But for a brief interval for a light meal at 1 p.m., she would be incessantly at work at her desk till 4 P.M., passing the copy to the composing department, writing articles and afterwards passing final proofs. When the paper came out, she would go to the Y. M. I.A. and have a cup of tea with toast and attend some meeting or other, often having to make a speech. Thence she would go to Adyar where important correspondence would be looked into and articles written for the next day. Sixteen hours a day was the rule—often eighteen ; and there have been occasions when she could not leave for Adyar before 9 P.M.

It was a problem to her, during the internment, to pass her time. For a diversion, she took to typewriting ; but that did not greatly relieve her. Visitors found her easily irritated, and she seemed to think that the fight for her release was not kept up as intense as the occasion demanded. And when she came out, her most intimate associates felt that she would not court or even risk another such experience.

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## The Punjab Troubles

The Calcutta Congress constituted the culminating point in Mrs. Besant's public life. From that day, she steadily lost ground and when in 1919, she opposed the Civil Disobedience movement against the Rowlatt Act, her retirement from leadership was complete.

Her attitude on that occasion took most of her supporters by surprise ; and to some, it came even as a shock. For, when Gandhiji came to Madras in 1919 just prior to launching that movement an arrangement had been reached between him and Mrs. Besant that the latter's attitude was to be one of neutrality. When, however, the disturbances occurred in the Punjab, she felt that she should oppose him and came out with that unexpected article on Brickbats *vs.* Bullets, explaining that mobs have to be firmly dealt with and that the responsibility for the suffering lay not on the Government but on the leaders who occasioned the mob mentality.

This hostility of Mrs. Besant to Gandhiji's movement has been ascribed to many causes ; and critics have not been wanting who even ascribed it to jealousy at his rise to leadership. Mrs. Besant was certainly not quite devoid of vanity ; and had a predilection for the limelight. But the most important factor that led to her change was the fear that India might cut herself off from the Empire. Though she had expressed often that India would be justified in going out, if the British Commonwealth denied her scope to rise to her full stature, it was mainly as a warning to Britain. It was a cardinal point in her creed that for the good of all, England, India and humanity, in general, Indo-British connection must be preserved. She felt that only such a union can prevent a racial war—between the Whites and the other races which would be the worst possible catastrophe for the world. Her Home Rule activities derived greater zest from that conviction, and after the Montagu

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pronouncement, she felt that a settlement acceptable to both India and England was not only possible, but almost accomplished.

## Wish of Higher Powers

If this main aim of her political life be remembered, most of her actions are easily explained. Whenever she felt that the movement in India was tending to snap the Indo-British bond, she was uneasy; and she was so upset also when the Diehards in England rendered the settlement difficult. This point was unfortunately not fully realised either in India or England by her critics; sometimes she was even ridiculed for maintaining that an Indo-British union was the wish of the Higher Powers.

Not that this belief of hers justifies her attitude towards the National movement after 1919. Her fear that Gandhiji's leadership or tactics would lead inevitably to India's separation from England are not borne out by subsequent events. For, at least during the next eight years, Gandhiji fought against laying down Independence as the Congress creed and even thereafter he was for an amicable settlement with England if that would concede the substance of Independence to India. But to Mrs. Besant it did not seem so. She felt that Gandhiji was letting loose forces which would weaken the tie between the two countries; and so she fought against his ascendancy.

And it was a tragic fight. In the Home Rule days, she had often expressed the wish that no public worker should live to be a "Yesterday"—a block to the onward surge of the National movement. Perhaps she felt later that even "Yesterdays" have a purpose to serve in the life of a Nation. And her opposition was confined to that phase of the National movement which she felt was wrongly directed, nor should it be forgotten that she had the misfortune of having as

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colleagues, politicians who were incapable of taking a robust view of the situation. It was a habit with her to be guided by one colleague or other. All went well so long as the guide was a Bradlaugh, or even a Mani Iyer, or a Wadia; but in later years, that role fell on lesser stalwarts.

## Her Greatest Service

But these defects are trivial when one recognises her unique services, whether as the founder of the Central Hindu College or the collaborator with Pandit Malavya in developing it into the Hindu University, or her unprecedented fight, almost single-handed, for the freedom of the press or her bold decision to secure the application of the principle of self-determination to India,—and in all of these she had the misfortune of having also to fight the suspicion that was inseparable from her White body—when we look back on these services, one cannot but be struck by the immensity of her services.

In the present century, India had five waves of nationalism. The new spirit that Sir P. M. Mehta introduced and Mr. Gokhale kept up, was taken a step forward by the Bengal upheaval following the Partition; and when it had nearly spent itself and the great leaders passed away one by one leaving a great void, it was Mrs. Besant that filled it and took India definitely a step further,—to the stage when Lok. Tilak took command, to pass it on almost immediately to Gandhiji. If we look at her record from this angle and note also the intricacies which the war introduced, any dispassionate critic will recognise that she played her role with consummate resource, courage and patriotism.

M. S. K.